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Ethical Deliberations in Poetry Over the Ages

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Abstract— *Poetry is a potent medium to communicate ideas and feelings alike. Based on selective use of words along with diverse figures of speech, poetry transmits an idea, a principle or a thought in an impressive way. Poetry is a form of creative writing that uses language to evoke emotions, ideas, and experiences in a concentrated and imaginative way. Poetry has been a powerful medium for expressing and exploring complex ideas and emotions. Poetry and ethics are mutually intertwined and related things. Right from ancient Greeks up-to the present day poets, ethical deliberations have always found a prominent place in the poetry of almost all ages. The present paper is an attempt to highlight how poetry has played its essential role in strengthening the bond between poetry and ethics in different periods and in different ages.*



Keywords— ***poetry, ethics, ideas, feelings, transformation, reformation.***

Poetry is basically a selective use of words and poetic devices like metaphors, similes, alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeic words, refrain, paradoxes etc. made by a poet to give expression to his/her original thoughts and feelings in a condensed form. As Bloom has put it, "Poetry essentially is figurative language, concentrated so that its form is both expressive and evocative. Figuration is a departure from the literal, and the form of a great poem itself can be a trope ("turning") or figure." (1). Writing poetry is therefore a meticulous task and not everyone is good at composing poetry of merit. A good poet should have all skill to manipulate the language to present his thoughts and feelings. In the words of Bloom:

> Language, to a considerable extent, is a concealed figuration: ironies and synecdoches, metonymies and metaphors that we recognize only when our awareness increases. Real poetry is aware of and exploits these ruined tropes, though it is both a burden and a resource, for later poets in a tradition, that language ages into this wealth of figuration. (5)

Over the ages poets have taken up diverse themes in their poetry but ethics has been a common concern for many of them. Through their verses, poets have contemplated over the nature of right and wrong, initiated deliberations over moral issues, and offered valuable reflections on the human condition. A poet does not live in loneliness; he is an important member of the society he lives in. while creating an artistic piece, a poet must consider that he is a vital unit in the edifice of that civilization and he has to address his poetry to the folks living in that very ethos. Therefore a poet owes a duty towards his community and is morally and ethically bound to strive for the welfare of his own people. In the words of Sartre:

> One of the chief motives of artistic creation is certainly the need of feeling that we are essential in relationship to the world. If I fix on canvas or in writing a certain aspect of the fields or the sea or a look on someone's face which I have disclosed, I am conscious of having produced them by condensing relationships, by introducing order where there was none, by imposing the unity of mind on the diversity of things. That is, I

> feel myself essential in relation to my creation. (39)

Poetry and its ethics has been the moot point right from the ancient Greek period up-to present day scholars. Plato was among the earliest thinkers among Greeks to deliberate on poetry and its ethical insinuations. Plato attacked poetry on intellectual grounds saying that it was a copy of the world of senses, and appearances and therefore twice removed from reality. Thus poetry could serve no useful function. On moral grounds, Plato declared that poets had a bad influence on social morality as they tell lies about gods and often represent them as corrupt. He also condemned poetry on emotional basis. M A R Habib writes in this regard:

> Plato's indictment of poetry has been based on (1) its intrinsic expression of falsehood, (2) its intrinsic operation in the realm of imitation, (3) its combination of a variety of functions, (4) its appeal to the lower aspects of the soul such as emotion and appetite, and (5) its expression of irreducible particularity and multiplicity rather than unity. (36)

Many scholars came up in rebuttal of these charges against poetry. Aristotle was among those thinkers who defended poetry on different grounds. He considered a poet greater than a philosopher or historian who creates something new by imitating reality. According to him, poetry has an ethical function as it brings about catharsis of human emotions and creates a balance in one's personality. His defence of poetry has been discussed in the following words:

> For Aristotle poetry and rhetoric had the status of "productive" sciences; these disciplines had their place in a hierarchy of knowledge; and Aristotle viewed them as rational pursuits, as seeking a knowledge of universals (rather than of random particulars), and as serving a social and moral function. (qtd. in Habib 48)

This trend continued and poetry was always defended against the onslaughts of its opponents and forcefully advocated as a powerful tool for propagating ethical values among the people. Example may be cited of others who supported poetry like the Roman critic Horace who wrote his treatise *The Art of Poetry*, the English critics Sir Philip Sydney who wrote *The Apology for Poetry* and Mathew Arnold who penned down *The Study of Poetry.* According to the Roman critic Horace:

> If a poet is to convey character with propriety, he must learn "the duties owed to country and friends, the affection fit for parent, brother, and guest, the proper business of senator and judge, the part to be played by a general sent to war. As against Plato, who had regarded the poet as necessarily distorting reality by offering a mere imitation of it, Horace insists that the principal fountainhead of writing correctly is wisdom and he sees poetry as a repository of social and religious wisdom. In the depiction of character, the poet must be aware of the various characteristics of men from childhood, youth, manhood to old age Hence, the poet's work must be based on knowledge; not bookish knowledge but a detailed empirical knowledge derived from acute observation of numerous situations in actual life. (qtd. in Habib 109)

Similarly the sixteenth century English poet and critic Sir Philip Sidney defended poetry against those criticizing it on different grounds. Sidney firmly believed that the poetry had an ethical function and it transported moral values to its readers. On one hand, it delights the reader but on the other it teaches them novel things of life. Poetry propagates goodness and encourages the readers to embrace all that is beneficial for a society. His arguments with regard to function of poetry have been summed up as:

> The ultimate aim of this kind of poetry is moral: the poet imitates, says Sidney, in order "both to delight and teach." The object of both teaching and delighting is goodness: by delighting, the poet moves people to welcome goodness; and by teaching, he enables them to "know that goodness whereunto they are moved." And this, says Sidney, is "the noblest scope to which ever any learning was directed". Given these aims of poetry, it is not surprising that Sidney relegates "rhyming and versing" to the status of ornaments: it is not these which produce a poet but, rather, the "feigning notable images of virtues, vices, . . . with . . . delightful teaching. (qtd. in Habib 263)

Taking a close look at the writings of these and such critics one realises that poetry has been held in high esteem by all sensible people living in different eras and different ages. Poets have responsibly advocated for moral and ethical teachings and strived for reforming the tastes of the people. During European renaissance and enlightenment, the world witnessed the supremacy of science and rule of scepticism and critical enquiry in every sphere of human activity. It shattered the beliefs of the people and crumbled the moral edifice of western civilisation into scraps. But sensitive minds joined hands to take people out of this ethical conundrum and moral vacuum and to suggest a remedy for this malady. Mathew Arnold was one such thinker who after witnessing this moral degeneration and

psychological turmoil came up with following words in 'The Study of Poetry':

> The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact. The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry. (161)

Scientific developments have increased amenities of life to the modern man and made life easy, but it has reduced life to meaningless existence. Modern theories have crushed the religious foundations and put to enquiry the basic philosophy of life but in this depressing condition poetry can provide succour to the world and bring a ray of hope in this sheer darkness. According to Mathew Arnold:

> More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. Science, I say, will appear incomplete without it. For, finely and truly does Wordsworth call poetry 'the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science…In poetry, which is thought and art in one, it is the glory, the eternal honour, that charlatanism shall find no entrance; that this noble sphere be kept inviolate and inviolable. Charlatanism is for confusing or obliterating the distinctions between excellent and inferior, sound and unsound or only half-sound, true and untrue or only half-true. It is charlatanism, conscious or unconscious, whenever we confuse or obliterate these. (161-62)

Thomas Sterns Eliot is a modern poet who has very adroitly tried to express his apprehensions on the moral deprivation of his age. In his poem "The Waste Land" he has raised overriding concern over the moral depravity, spiritual barrenness, disintegration, injured psyche of humanity and the disenchantment of early twentieth-century post-war Europe. This complex and fragmented poem delves into themes of cynicism, spiritual catastrophe, and the destruction of moral values in a post-World War I Europe. His poem echoes the social disintegration stimulating readers to tackle the consequences of moral and spiritual emptiness:

> April is the cruellest month, breeding
> Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
> Memory and desire, stirring
> Dull roots with spring rain. (1-4)

Similarly following lines represent the intellectual void of the waste landers and spiritual starvation they are going through:

"And dry grass singing

But sound of water over a rock

Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees

Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop

But there is no water…" (Line 354- 358)

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> But sound of water over a rock
>
> Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees
>
> Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop
>
> But there is no water… (354- 358)

Therefore Eliot instructs these suffering people to follow Indian philosophy of Vedas and Upanishads which stress on Giving, Being Compassionate and Self-control and thereby land themselves into relief, redemption, salvation and regeneration.

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The poem "The Second Coming" by W.B Yeats is another apt example to show how poetry and ethics are interrelated. Yeats quite dexterously narrates post-war corrupt modern Europe in the following words:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned; (1-7)

The poet fears that the modern world has reached the brim of destruction as anarchy and lawlessness is ruling the roost. Poetry continues to serve as a medium that illuminates the moral dimensions of our existence, reminding us of the eternal significance of ethics in our lives.

Many other world famous poets like the American civil rights activists Maya Angelou and Langston Hughes, and the Chilean poet and diplomat Pablo Neruda have also shown their social and political engagement through their poetry. Poets do address important issues such as racism, inequality, and war, and to give voice to marginalized or oppressed groups. Good poetry has ever espoused ethical concerns over the ages, as poets use their poetry to explore questions of morality, justice, and the human condition. According to Sanders, "Poetry can be a powerful tool for ethical inquiry, helping us to reflect on our values and beliefs." (23) Similarly, poets often use their work to reflect on the joy and sufferings of humankind, and to suggest new insights into the human condition. Poetry arouses sympathy and empathy, and summons readers to look into their own ethical commitments. As Nussbaum notes, "Poetry can help us to imagine the lives of others and to recognize the ways in which our own lives are interconnected with those of others." (56).

Many poets have acknowledged it as an obligation to challenge oppressive structures and to call attention to injustice. Through their poetry, they openly critique unjust power structures and domination, and appeal readers to cogitate on their role in changing these systems. Poetry stimulates the readers towards ethical reflection and self-examination. Through their poems, poets urge readers to reflect on their own values and beliefs, and to deal with questions of right and wrong. Poetry urges the readers to sympathise and empathise with the sufferers in any part of the world. The poem "Home" by Warsan Shire is a good example in which the emotional mayhem of refugees has been expressed vividly and a reader identifies himself with these sufferers. One of the significant ethical concerns poetry has touched upon from past up-to present is the safeguarding of environment. After 1960s this concern has received impetus and developed into a movement called Environmental ethics. Protection of natural entities and the sustainable use of natural resources has been a serious concern for many of the poets like Keats, Wordsworth, Dickenson, Frost, Atwood and many others. William Blake's "London", Wordsworth's "Nutting" G M Hopkins' "Binsey Poplars" Sylvia Plath's "Elm" and many other such poems exemplify this concern.

To sum up, it can be said that poetry is an effective tool for propagation of ethical concerns and poets are potent mediators of social change. Poetry has played seminal role in moulding the mind-set of people and preaching ethics. Poets from the Greek period up to the present age have been viewed as agents of positive change. Poetry and ethics are inseparable and poets will continue to influence people and carry forward ethical values far and wide.

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